

Commentary

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THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

THERE seems to be a fundamental problem when we refer to the subject of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The approach of comparing it with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* in terms of mythology and lore of the dead person seems to miss the point, which is the fundamental principle of birth and death recurring constantly in this life. One could refer to this book as "The Tibetan Book of Birth". The book is not based on death as such, but on a completely different concept of death. It is a "Book of Space". Space contains birth and death; space creates the environment in which to behave, breathe and act, it is the fundamental environment which provides the inspiration for this book.

The pre-Buddhist Bön civilisation of Tibet contained very accurate indications on how to treat the psychic force left behind by a dead person, the footprints or temperature, so to speak, which is left behind when he is gone. It seems that both the Bön tradition and the Egyptian are based on that particular type of experience, how to relate with the footprints, rather than dealing with the person's consciousness. But the basic principle I am trying to put across now is that of the uncertainty of sanity and insanity, or confusion and enlightenment, and the possibilities of all sorts of visionary discoveries that happen on the way to sanity or insanity.

Bardo means gap; it is not only the interval of suspension after we die but also suspension in the living situation; death happens in the living situation as well. The bardo experience is part of our basic psychological make-up. There are all kinds of

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

bardo experiences happening to us all the time, experiences of paranoia and uncertainty in everyday life; it is like not being sure of our ground, not knowing quite what we have asked for or what we are getting into. So this book is not only a message for those who are going to die and those who are already dead, but it is also a message for those who are already born; birth and death apply to everybody constantly, at this very moment.

The bardo experience can be seen in terms of the six realms of existence that we go through, the six realms of our psychological states. Then it can be seen in terms of the different deities who approach us, as they are described in the book. In the first week the peaceful deities, and in the last week the wrathful deities; there are the five tathāgatas and the herukas, and the gaurīs who are messengers of the five tathāgatas, presenting themselves in all sorts of terrifying and revolting fashions. The details presented here are very much what happens in our daily living situation, they are not just psychedelic experiences or visions that appear after death. These experiences can be seen purely in terms of the living situation; that is what we are trying to work on.

In other words, the whole thing is based on another way of looking at the psychological picture of ourselves in terms of a practical meditative situation. Nobody is going to save us, everything is left purely to the individual, the commitment to who we are. Gurus or spiritual friends might instigate that possibility, but fundamentally they have no function.

How do we know that these things actually happen to people who are dying? Has anyone come back from the grave and told us the experiences they went through? Those impressions are so strong that someone recently born should have memories of the period between death and birth; but then as we grow up we are indoctrinated by our parents and society, and we put ourselves into a different framework; so that the original deep impressions become faded except for occasional sudden glimpses. Even then we are so suspicious of such experiences, and so afraid of losing any tangible ground in terms of living in this world, that any intangible kind of experience is treated half-heartedly or dismissed altogether. To look at this process from the point of view of what

happens when we die seems like the study of a myth; we need some practical experience of this continual process of bardo.

There is the conflict between body and consciousness, and there is the continual experience of death and birth. There is also the experience of the bardo of dharmatā, the luminosity, and of the bardo of becoming, of possible future parents or grounding situations. We also have the visions of the wrathful and peaceful divinities, which are happening constantly, at this very moment. If we are open and realistic enough to look at it in this way, then the actual experience of death and the bardo state will not be either purely a myth or an extraordinary shock, because we have already worked with it and become familiar with the whole thing.

THE BARDO OF THE MOMENT BEFORE DEATH

The first basic bardo experience is the experience of uncertainty about whether one is actually going to die, in the sense of losing contact with the solid world, or whether one could continue to go on living. This uncertainty is not seen in terms of leaving the body, but purely in terms of losing one's ground; the possibility of stepping out from the real world into an unreal world.

We could say that the real world is that in which we experience pleasure and pain, good and bad. There is some act of intelligence which provides the criteria of things as they are, a basic dualistic notion. But if we are completely in touch with these dualistic feelings, that absolute experience of duality is itself the experience of non-duality. Then there is no problem at all, because duality is seen from a perfectly open and clear point of view in which there is no conflict; there is a tremendous encompassing vision of oneness. Conflict arises because duality is not seen as it is at all. It is seen only in a biased way, a very clumsy way. In fact, we do not perceive anything properly, and we begin to wonder whether such things as myself and my projections really exist. So when we talk about the dualistic world as confusion, that confusion is not the complete dualistic world, but only half-hearted, and this causes tremendous dissatisfaction and uncertainty; it builds up to the point of fear of becoming insane, the point where there are possibilities of leaving the world of duality and going into a

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

sort of woolly, fuzzy emptiness, which is the world of the dead, the graveyard that exists in the midst of fog.

The book describes the death experience in terms of the different elements of the body, going deeper and deeper. Physically you feel heavy when the earth element dissolves into water; and when water dissolves into fire you find that the circulation begins to cease functioning. When fire dissolves into air, any feeling of warmth or growth begins to dissolve; and when air dissolves into space you lose the last feeling of contact with the physical world. Finally, when space or consciousness dissolves into the central *nāḍī*, there is a sense of internal luminosity, an inner glow, when everything has become completely introverted.

Such experiences happen constantly. The tangible, logical state dissolves, and one is not quite certain whether one is attaining enlightenment or losing one's sanity. Whenever that experience happens it can be seen in four or five different stages. First the tangible quality of physical, living logic becomes vague; in other words, you lose physical contact. Then you automatically take refuge in a more functional situation, which is the water element; you reassure yourself that your mind is still functioning. In the next stage, the mind is not quite sure whether it is functioning properly or not, something begins to cease operating in its circulation. The only way to relate is through emotions, you try to think of someone you love or hate, something very vivid, because the watery quality of the circulation does not work any more, so the fiery temperature of love and hate becomes more important. Even that gradually dissolves into air, and there is a faint experience of openness, so that there is a tendency to lose your grip on concentrating on love or trying to remember the person you love. The whole thing seems to be hollow inside.

The next experience is the luminosity. You are willing to give in because you cannot struggle any more, and a kind of carelessness arises at that moment. It is as though pain and pleasure are occurring at the same time, or a powerful shower of icy cold water and boiling hot water is pouring simultaneously over your body. It is an intense experience, very powerful and full, the experience of oneness where both pain and pleasure are the same. The dualis-

tic struggle of trying to *be* something is completely confused by the two extreme forces of hope for enlightenment and fear of becoming insane. The two extremes are so concentrated that it allows a certain relaxation; and when you do not struggle any more the luminosity presents itself naturally.

The next step is the experience of luminosity in terms of daily life. The luminosity is neutral ground or background, a gap when the intensity slackens. Then some intelligence begins to connect it to the awakened state of mind, leading to a sudden glimpse of meditative experience or buddha nature, which could also be called the dharmakāya. But if we have no means of connecting with the basic intelligence, and confused energy still dominates our process of mind, then the energy builds up blindly and finally falls down into different levels of diluted energy, so to speak, from the absolute energy of the luminosity. Some basic tendency of grasping begins to develop in the state of luminosity, and from that the experience of the six realms of the world develops according to its intensity. But that tenseness or tightness cannot just function by itself without an activator of energy; in other words, energy is being used in order to grasp. We can now look at the six realms of the world from the point of view of different types of instinct.

THE REALM OF HELL

We can begin with the realm of hell, which is the most intense. First there is a build-up of energies, of emotions, to a crescendo, so that at some stage we find it very confusing whether the energies are controlling us or we are controlling them. Then suddenly we lose track of this whole race, and our mind is put into a blank state which is the luminosity. From that blank state an intense temptation to fight begins to develop, and that paranoia also brings terror. Originally the paranoia and terror were supposed to fight against something, but one is not quite certain whom exactly one is fighting; and when the whole thing has developed, the terror begins to turn against oneself. When one tries to strike out, instead of fighting the projection one is striking inward.

It is like the story of the hermit who saw a leg of lamb in front of him, and wanted to pick it up and cook it. His teacher told

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

him to mark it with a cross, then later he discovered that the cross was marked on his own chest. It is that kind of notion; you think there is something outside to attack or fight or win over. In most cases hatred is like that. You are angry with something and try to destroy it, but at the same time the process becomes self-destructive, it turns inward and you would like to run away from it; but then it seems too late, you are the anger itself, so there is nowhere to run away. You are haunting yourself constantly, and that is the development of hell.

Very vivid descriptions of hell are found in Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, and symbolically each intense torture is a psychological portrait of oneself. In the hell realm you are not exactly punished, but overwhelmed by the environment of terror, which is described as fields and mountains of red-hot iron and space filled with sparks of fire. Even if you decide to run away you have to walk over this burning metal, and if you decide not to run away you are turned into charcoal yourself. There is intense claustrophobia, heat coming from all directions; the whole earth is turned into hot metal, whole rivers are turned into melted iron, and the whole sky is permeated with fire.

The other type of hell is the reverse, the experience of intense cold and snow, an icy world in which everything is completely frozen. This is another type of aggression, the aggression which refuses to communicate at all. It is a kind of indignation which usually comes from intense pride, and the pride turns into an ice-cold environment which reinforced by self-satisfaction begins to get into the system. It does not allow us to dance or smile or hear the music.

THE HUNGRY GHOST REALM

Then we have another realm of mind, that of the pretas or hungry ghosts. To begin with we get into the luminosity by working up not aggression this time but intense greed. There is a sense of poverty, yet at the same time a sense of richness, contradictory and yet operating together simultaneously.

In the hungry ghost realm there is a tremendous feeling of

richness, of gathering a lot of possessions; whatever you want you do not have to look for, but you find yourself possessing it. And this makes us more hungry, more deprived, because we get satisfaction not from possessing alone but from searching. But now, since we have everything already, we cannot go out and look for something and possess it. It is very frustrating, a fundamental insatiable hunger.

It is as though you are completely full, so full that you cannot eat any more; but you love to eat, and so you begin to have hallucinations of the flavour of food and the pleasure of eating it, tasting it, chewing it, swallowing it and digesting it. The whole process seems luxurious, and you feel extremely envious of other people who can really be hungry and eat.

This is symbolised by the image of a person with a gigantic belly and extremely thin neck and tiny mouth. There are different stages of this experience, depending on the intensity of hunger. Some people can pick food up, but then it dissolves or they cannot eat it; some people can pick it up and put it in their mouth, but they cannot swallow it; and some people can swallow it but once it gets into their stomach it begins to burn. There are all sorts of levels of that hunger, which constantly happen in everyday life.

The joy of possessing does not bring us pleasure any more once we already possess something, and we are constantly trying to look for more possessions, but it turns out to be the same process all over again; so there is constant intense hunger which is based not on a sense of poverty but on the realisation that we already have everything yet we cannot enjoy it. It is the energy there, the act of exchange, that seems to be more exciting; collecting it, holding it, putting it on, or eating it. That kind of energy is a stimulus, but the grasping quality makes it very awkward. Once you hold something you want to possess it, you no longer have the enjoyment of holding it, but you do not want to let go. Again it is a kind of love-hate relationship to projections. It is like the analogy that the next door neighbour's garden is greener; once it becomes ours we realise there is no longer the joy or appreciation of beauty as we saw it at the beginning; the romantic quality of a love affair begins to fade away.

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

THE ANIMAL REALM

The animal realm is characterised by the absence of sense of humour. We discover that we cannot remain neutral in the luminosity, so we begin to play deaf and dumb, intelligently playing ignorant, which means that one is completely concealing another area, the area of sense of humour. It is symbolised by animals, which cannot laugh or smile; joy and pain are known to animals, but somehow the sense of humour or irony is not known to them.

One could develop this by believing in a certain religious framework, theological or philosophical conclusions, or by just simply remaining secure, practical and solid. Such a person could be very efficient, very good and consistent at work, and quite contented. It is like a country farmer who attends to his farm methodically, with constant awareness and openness and efficiency; or an executive who runs a business; or a family man whose life is very happy, predictable and secure, with no areas of mystery involved at all. If he buys a new gadget there are always directions for using it. If there is any problem he can go to lawyers or priests or policemen, all sorts of professional people who are also secure and comfortable in their professions. It is utterly sensible and predictable, and highly mechanical at the same time.

What is lacking is that if any unknown, unpredictable situation occurs, there is a feeling of paranoia, of being threatened. If there are people who do not work, who look different, whose whole life-style is irregular, then the very existence of such people is in itself threatening. Anything unpredictable fundamentally threatens the basic pattern. So that apparently sane and solid situation without sense of humour is the animal realm.

THE HUMAN REALM

The human realm brings out another kind of situation which is not quite the same as the animal realm of surviving and living life. The human realm is based on passion, the tendency to explore and enjoy; it is the area of research and development, constantly trying to enrich. One could say that the human realm is closer psycholog-

ically to the hungry ghost quality of striving for something, but it also has some element of the animal realm, of putting everything into action predictably. And there is something extra connected with the human realm, a very strange kind of suspicion which comes with passion, and which makes human beings more cunning, shifty and slippery. They can invent all sorts of tools and accentuate them in all sorts of sophisticated ways so as to catch another slippery person, and the other slippery person develops his or her own equipment of anti-tools. So we build up our world with tremendous success and achievement, but this escalation of building up tools and anti-tools develops constantly, and introduces more sources of passion and intrigue. Finally we are unable to accomplish such a big undertaking. We are subject to birth and death. The experience can be born, but it can also die; our discoveries may be impermanent and temporary.

THE REALM OF THE JEALOUS GODS

The realm of the asuras or jealous gods is the highest realm as far as communication goes, it is a very intelligent situation. When you are suddenly separated from the luminosity there is a feeling of bewilderment, as though someone had dropped you in the middle of a wilderness; there is a tendency to look back and suspect your own shadow, whether it is a real shadow or someone's strategy. Paranoia is a kind of radar system, the most efficient radar system the ego could have. It picks up all sorts of faint and tiny objects, suspecting each one of them, and every experience in life is regarded as something threatening.

This is known as the realm of jealousy or envy, but it is not envy or jealousy as we generally think of them. It is something extremely fundamental, based on survival and winning. Unlike the human or animal realm, the purpose of this realm of the jealous gods is purely to function within the realm of intrigue; that is all there is, it is both occupation and entertainment. It is as if a person were born as a diplomat, raised as a diplomat, and died as a diplomat. Intrigue and relationship are his life-style and his whole livelihood. This intrigue could be based on any kind of relationship, an emotional relationship, or the relationship between

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

friends, or the relationship of teacher and student, whatever there may be.

THE REALM OF THE GODS

The final stage is the realm of the gods, deva-loka. Again, when the person awakes from or steps out of the luminosity, there is some kind of unexpected pleasure, and one wants to maintain that pleasure. Instead of completely dissolving into neutral ground one suddenly begins to realise one's individuality, and individuality brings a sense of responsibility, of maintaining oneself. That maintaining oneself is the state of samādhi, perpetually living in a state of absorption and peace; it is the realm of the gods, which is known as the realm of pride. Pride in the sense of building one's own centralised body, preserving one's own health; in other words, it is intoxication with the existence of ego. You begin to feel thankful to have such confirmation that you *are* something after all, instead of the luminosity which is no man's land. And because you *are* something, you have to maintain yourself, which brings a natural state of comfort and pleasure, complete absorption into oneself.

These six realms of the world are the source of the whole theme of living in saṃsāra, and also of stepping into the dharmakāya realm. This will help us to understand the significance of the visions described in the book of the bardo of becoming, which is another kind of world. There is a confrontation of these two worlds: the experience of the six realms from the point of view of ego, and from the point of view of transcending ego. These visions could be seen as expressions of neutral energy, rather than as gods to save you from saṃsāra or demons to haunt you.

THE BARDO OF DHARMATĀ

Along with the six realms, we should have some understanding of the basic idea of bardo: 'bar' means in between, and 'do' means island or mark; a sort of landmark which stands between two things. It is rather like an island in the midst of a lake. The concept of bardo is based on the period between sanity and insanity, or the period between confusion and the confusion just about to be

transformed into wisdom; and of course it could be said of the experience which stands between death and birth. The past situation has just occurred and the future situation has not yet manifested itself so there is a gap between the two. This is basically the bardo experience.

The dharmatā bardo is the experience of luminosity. Dharmatā means the essence of things as they are, the is-ness quality. So the dharmatā bardo is basic, open, neutral ground, and the perception of that ground is dharmakāya, the body of truth or law.

When the perceiver or activator begins to dissolve into basic space, then that basic space contains the dharma, contains the truth, but that truth is transmitted in terms of saṃsāra. So the space between saṃsāra and the truth, the space the dharma comes through, provides the basic ground for the details of the five tathāgatas and the peaceful and wrathful visions.

These expressions of the dharmatā are manifested not in physical or visual terms but in terms of energy, energy which has the quality of the elements, earth, water, fire, air, and space. We are not talking about ordinary substances, the gross level of the elements, but of subtle elements. From the perceiver's point of view, perceiving the five tathāgatas in the visions is not vision and not perception, not quite experience. It is not vision, because if you have vision you have to look, and looking is in itself an extroverted way of separating yourself from the vision. You cannot perceive, because once you begin to perceive you are introducing that experience into your system, which means again a dualistic style of relationship. You cannot even know it, because as long as there is a watcher to tell you that these are your experiences, you are still separating those energies away from you. It is very important to understand this basic principle, for it is really the key point of all the iconographical symbolism in tantric art. The popular explanation is that these pictures of different divinities are psychological portraits, but there is something more to it than this.

One of the most highly advanced and dangerous forms of practice is the bardo retreat, which consists of seven weeks of meditation in utter darkness. There are very simple visualisations, largely based on the principle of the five tathāgatas seen as differ-

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

ent types of eyes. The central place of the peaceful tathāgatas is in the heart, so you see the different types of eyes in your heart; and the principle of the wrathful divinities is centralised in the brain, so you see certain types of eyes gazing at each other within your brain. These are not ordinary visualisations, but they arise out of the possibility of insanity and of losing ground altogether to the dharmatā principle.

Then an absolute and definite experience of luminosity develops. It flashes on and off; sometimes you experience it, and sometimes you do not experience it but you are in it, so there is a journey between dharmakāya and luminosity. Generally around the fifth week there comes a basic understanding of the five tathāgatas, and these visions actually happen, not in terms of art at all. One is not exactly aware of their presence, but an abstract quality begins to develop, purely based on energy. When energy becomes independent, complete energy, it begins to look at itself and perceive itself, which transcends the ordinary idea of perception. It is as though you walk because you know you do not need any support; you walk unconsciously. It is that kind of independent energy without any self-consciousness, which is not at all phantasy—but then again, at the same time, one never knows.

THE NATURE OF THE VISIONS

The visions that develop in the bardo state, and the brilliant colours and sounds that come along with the visions, are not made out of any kind of substance which needs maintenance from the point of view of the perceiver, but they just happen, as expression of silence and expression of emptiness. In order to perceive them properly, the perceiver of these visions cannot have fundamental, centralised ego. Fundamental ego in this case is that which causes one to meditate or perceive something.

If there were a definite perceiver, one could have a revelation of a god or external entity, and that perception could extend almost as far as a non-dualistic level. Such perception becomes very blissful and pleasant, because there is not only the watcher but also something more subtle, a basic spiritual entity, a subtle concept or impulse, which looks outward. It begins to perceive a

beautiful idea of wideness and openness and blissfulness, which invites the notion of oneness with the universe. This feeling of the openness and wideness of the cosmos could become very easy and comfortable to get into. It is like returning to the womb, a kind of security. Because of the inspiration of such union, the person becomes loving and kind naturally, and speaks in beautiful language. Quite possibly some form of divine vision could be perceived in such a state, or flashes of light or music playing, or some presence approaching.

In the case of such a person who relates to himself and his projections in that way, it is possible that in the after death period of the bardo state he might be extremely irritated to see the visions of the tathāgatas, which are not dependent on his perception. The visions of the tathāgatas do not ask for union at all, they are terribly hostile; they are just there, irritatingly there because they will not react to any attempts to communicate.

The first vision that appears is the vision of the peaceful divinities; not peacefulness in the sense of the love and light experience we have just been talking about, but of completely encompassing peace, immovable, invincible peace, the peaceful state that cannot be challenged, that has no age, no end, no beginning. The symbol of peace is represented in the shape of a circle; it has no entrance, it is eternal.

Not only in the bardo experience after death alone, but also during our lifetime, similar experiences occur constantly. When a person is dwelling on that kind of union with the cosmos—everything is beautiful and peaceful and loving—there is the possibility of some other element coming in, exactly the same as the vision of the peaceful divinities. You discover that there is a possibility of losing your ground, losing the whole union completely, losing your identity as yourself, and dissolving into an utterly and completely harmonious situation, which is, of course, the experience of the luminosity. This state of absolute peacefulness seems to be extremely frightening, and there is often the possibility that one's faith might be shaken by such a sudden glimpse of another dimension, where even the concept of union is not applicable any more.

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

There is also the experience of the wrathful divinities. They are another expression of peacefulness, the ruthless, unyielding quality, not allowing side-tracks of any kind. If you approach them and try to re-shape the situation they throw you back. That is the kind of thing that continually happens with emotions in the living situation. Somehow the feeling of unity where everything is peaceful and harmonious does not hold final truth, because whenever there is a sudden eruption of energies in terms of passion or aggression or any conflict, suddenly something wakes you up; that is the wrathful quality of the peacefulness. When you are involved in ego-manufactured, comforting situations of any kind, the actual reality of the nakedness of mind and the colourful aspect of emotions will wake you up, possibly in a very violent way, as a sudden accident or sudden chaos.

Of course there is always the possibility of ignoring these reminders and continuing to believe the original idea. So the concept of leaving the body and entering the luminosity, then waking up from the luminosity and perceiving these visions in the third bardo state could be seen symbolically as being delivered into that open space—space without even a body to relate to, such open space that you cannot have the notion of union because there is nothing to be united with or by. But there are flashes of energy floating, which could be either diverted or channelled in; that is the definition of mind in this case, the gullible energy which could be diverted into another situation or turned into a rightful one. The possibility of freeing oneself into the saṃbhogakāya level of the five tathāgata realms depends on whether or not there is any attempt to go on playing the same game constantly.

At the same time as these vivid and colourful experiences, there is also the playing back of the six realms of the bardo experience. The perception of the six realms and the perception of the five tathāgatas are one state, but they have different styles. It seems that the perceiver of the tathāgatas, this kind of mind, has tremendous ability to keep the link between physical body and mind, very spontaneously. There is no division between the spirituality of the mind and the spirituality of the body; they are both the same, so there is no conflict.

Commentary

The book says that the first time you awaken from the unconscious absorption in the body, you have a visual experience, minute and precise and clear, luminous and terrifying, rather like seeing a mirage in a spring field, and also you hear a sound which is like a thousand thunders roaring simultaneously. In the mental state there is a looseness and detached feeling, while at the same time overloaded with intelligence, as though the person had a head without a body, a gigantic head floating in space. So the actual visual experience of this bardo state, the preparation for perceiving the visions of the tathāgatas, is clear and intelligent and luminous, but at the same time intangible, not knowing where you are exactly; and that sensual experience is also happening in the audible sphere, a deep sound roaring in the background, earth-shaking, but at the same time there is nothing to vibrate. Similar experiences can also happen in life, although the absence of a physical body makes the bardo experience more clear and more hallucinatory. In a life situation there is not the extreme aspect of the mirage, but there is a basically desolate quality, loneliness and flickering, when the person begins to realise that there is no background area to relate to as ego. That sudden glimpse of egolessness brings a kind of shakiness.

THE FIRST DAY

It says in this book that having woken up, after four days of unconsciousness, into the luminosity there is a sudden understanding that this is the bardo state, and at that very moment the reverse of saṃsāric experience occurs. This is the perception of light and images, which are the reverse of body or form; instead of being a tangible situation of form it is an intangible state of quality.

Then you get the dazzling light, which is a link of communication between body and intelligence. Although one is absorbed into the state of luminosity, there is still some intelligence operating, sharp and precise, with a dazzling quality. So the psychophysical body and also the intelligence, the intellectual mind, are transformed into space.

In this case the colour of space is blue, and the vision that appears is Vairocana. Vairocana is described as the buddha who

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

has no back and front; he is panoramic vision, all-pervading with no centralised notion. So Vairocana is often personified as a meditating figure with four faces, simultaneously perceiving all directions. He is white in colour, because that perception does not need any other tinge, it is just the primordial colour, white. He is holding a wheel with eight spokes, which represents transcending the concepts of direction and time. The whole symbolism of Vairocana is the decentralised notion of panoramic vision; both centre and fringe are everywhere. It is complete openness of consciousness, transcending the skandha of consciousness.

Along with that there is a vision of the realm of the gods. The depth of the blue is terrifying because there is no centre to hold on to, but the glimpse of the white light is like seeing a lamp burning in darkness, and one tends to walk towards it.

The realm of the gods also happens in our daily life experiences. Whenever we are absorbed in a spiritual state, a trance-like state of joy and pleasure, involved in our own self and its projections, whenever that joy comes there is also the possibility of its opposite, the centreless, all-pervading quality of Vairocana. It is extremely irritating, not at all attractive because there is nothing to indulge in, no basic ground in which we can enjoy ourselves. It is all very well to have a panoramic vision of openness, but if there is no one to perceive it, it is terrible from the point of view of ego. The contrast between the realm of the gods and Vairocana constantly happens in life, and often the choice is left to us, whether we should cling to a centralised source of spiritual pleasure, or whether we should let go into pure openness without a centre.

This experience comes from aggression, because aggression holds us back and keeps us away from seeing Vairocana. Aggression is a definite, solid thing; when we are in a state of complete anger it is like imagining ourselves to be a porcupine, putting out everything possible to protect ourselves. There is no room for panoramic vision; we do not want to have four faces at all, we hardly even want to have one eye. It is very centralised and completely introverted, that is why anger might make us run away from the expansive quality of Vairocana.

Transcending the water element, the white light begins to dawn, and in the east, the Realm of Complete Joy, the tathāgata Vajrasattva or Akṣobhya appears.

Akṣobhya means immovable, and Vajrasattva means vajra being; they both indicate toughness, solidness. In Indian mythology vajra is the most precious jewel, or the thunderbolt, which destroys all other weapons and jewels, which can cut diamond. There was a certain sage who meditated on Mount Meru for centuries, and when he died his bones were transformed into vajra, and Indra, the king of the gods, discovered this and made his weapon out of it, a vajra with a hundred points. The vajra has three qualities: it can never be used frivolously, it always fulfils its function of destroying the enemy, and it always returns into your hand. It is indestructible, adamantine.

The tathāgata Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya is holding a five-pointed vajra,—this absolutely solid object, and he is sitting on an elephant throne,—what could be more solid than that? His consort is Buddha-Ločanā, the Buddha Eye. In the Buddhist tradition there are five types of eyes: the bodily eye, the buddha eye, the wisdom eye, the heavenly eye and the dharma eye. In this case the buddha eye refers to awakening. You may have a very solid, stable situation, but if you have no outlet it can stagnate. The feminine principle automatically opens out, she provides the exit or activation of the whole thing, the element of communication from solidness into a flowing, living situation.

He is accompanied by the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, the Essence of Earth, who represents any kind of fertility and growth, also an expression of that particular buddha. And he is also accompanied by Maitreya, the Loving One. That firmness, solid and fertile at the same time, needs emotion as well in order to give life to the solidity; it is the emotional, compassionate quality of love, not necessarily selfless compassion.

Then there are the female bodhisattvas: Lāsyā is the bodhisattva of dance or mudrā, she is more performer than dancer, the

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

offering goddess who displays the beauty and dignity of the body; she shows the majesty and seductiveness of the feminine principle. And Puṣpā is the goddess of flowers, the bodhisattva of vision, sight, the scenery.

Transcending the skandha of form, are mirror-like rays, white and glittering, clear and precise, which shine from the heart of Vajrasattva and his consort. Along with that there is the light of hell, grey light without brilliance. When the person perceives such a display of the vajra quality it seems too complicated to work with, so there is a possibility of simplifying it into the grey light, associated with hell or a fundamental notion of paranoia which is always connected with the intellectual vajra quality. In order to have intellectual understanding you have to see what is wrong with everything rather than what is right; that is the natural vajra intellectual quality, the critical attitude of the logical mind, which also brings solidity. If you have an understanding of something founded on the logic of a critical attitude, then your wisdom is based on extremely solid and definite ground; it is unshakeable. But the other aspect of it is the realm of hell, when the critical attitude does not relate to solidity or basic sanity of any kind, but sets off a chain reaction, an alarm clock so to speak, of paranoia.

THE THIRD DAY

In the process of this sequence of days, the dharmadhātu quality of Vairocana has provided space, and the quality of Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya has provided solidity. Now the vision of Ratnaśaṃbhava is described. Ratnaśaṃbhava is the central figure of the ratna family, which consists of richness and dignity, the expansion of wealth into other areas, fundamentally solid, rich and expansive. The negative aspect of ratna quality is taking advantage of richness in order to march into other territories, expanding into whatever space exists, over-emphasising generosity to the point where there is a blockage of communication.

Ratnaśaṃbhava is yellow in colour, which represents the earth; fertility in the sense of wealth and richness. He is holding the wish-fulfilling gem, which also means the absence of poverty. And Māmakī, his consort, represents water; in order to have rich, fertile soil the earth needs water.

Commentary

The bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha is the Essence of Space. With such rich ground you also need space to create perspective. And there is Samantabhadra, the All-Good, who is the basic strength, the organic quality of the whole maṇḍala of the ratna family. According to the traditional way of finding appropriate locations to build a home or a monastery or cultivate a new field (which was quite possibly developed by the Bön tradition of Tibet), you do not build a house merely at random, but there are psychological factors involved. There should be the open feeling of the east, and the luscious feeling of the south with brooks and rivers, and the fortifying feeling of the west with rocks, and the protective feeling of the north with its mountain ranges. There is also a way of water divining by looking at the shape of the land, and next to the spring of water there is usually a spot which is not swampy but has a good rocky foundation to build a house. That particular rocky substance, surrounded by such appropriate shapes and locations, is called Samantabhadra, the soil Samantabhadra. Samantabhadra is also associated with aspiration and positive thinking, a basic confidence and positive way of looking at the future.

Ratnasambhava is accompanied by the female bodhisattva Mālā, the goddess who offers all sorts of adornments, garlands, necklaces, bracelets and so on, to bring out the highlights of the earthy quality of ratna. The other female bodhisattva is Dhūpā, the goddess who carries incense. She represents smell, scent, the environmental situation that earth creates; the fresh air, air without pollution, and the room for vegetation to grow and rivers to run.

The light associated with the ratna family is the yellow light of equanimity, non-discriminating light. But it seems as though all that detail and richness of the ratna maṇḍala is too elaborate, too majestic, so there is a possibility that one would rather run into a very simple and self-satisfied little corner, and that little area is pride, the dim light of the human world.

THE FOURTH DAY

On the fourth day there is the purified element of fire, represented by Amitābha, the padma family. Amitābha means boundless light, and the basic quality of padma is magnetising, seductive, invitingly

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

warm, open and compassionate. The light is boundless because it just shines naturally, it does not ask for any reward. It has the nature of fire, not in the sense of aggression, but of consuming any substance without rejecting or accepting.

He is holding a lotus in his hand, which means the same thing: the lotus opens when the sun or the moon shines on it, it opens towards the light, so any situation coming from outside is accepted. It also has the quality of complete purity; such compassion could grow in mud or dirt but the flower is completely perfect and clean. Sitting on a peacock seat is again openness and acceptance; in mythology the peacock is supposed to be fed on poison, and its beautiful colours are formed from eating poison. It is openness which extends so far that it can deal with any kind of negative situation, in fact compassion is exhilarated by negative situations.

His consort Pāṇḍaravāsīnī, the White-clad One, is associated with the symbolism of an Indian legend of certain clothes woven from stone, which could only be cleaned by fire. She represents the essence of fire, consuming everything, and also the result of the consuming process, purification, complete compassion.

Then there is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the essence of compassion, he who sees in all directions, which is the ultimate intelligence of compassion. Whenever compassion is needed it happens naturally, it has a sharp, automatic quality; it is not idiot or blind compassion, but intelligent compassion which always fulfills its function. Mañjuśrī too represents the mechanical aspect of compassion, but here it is an intellectual rather than a purely impulsive quality. He is also the creator of sound, the communication of compassion; he represents the sound of emptiness which is the source of all words.

Then there is Gītā, the female bodhisattva of song, who sings to the music of Mañjuśrī; and along with her is Ālokā, who holds a lamp or torch. The whole process of compassion has rhythm and light, it has the depth of intelligence and the sharpness of efficiency, and it has the purifying nature of the white-clad buddha as well as the infinite, all-pervading quality of Amitābha.

That is the complete padma family, which transcends the skandha of perception and shines with the red light of discriminat-

ing awareness wisdom. Compassion is very detailed and precise, so it is necessary to have discriminating awareness wisdom, which does not mean discriminating in terms of acceptance and rejection, but simply seeing things as they are.

In this book it is associated with the realm of the hungry ghosts; there is some conflict here, because passion is usually connected with the human realm. All these padma qualities, sharpness and precision and depth and majesty, have been found too overwhelming, and somehow one would like to play a game of deaf and dumb; one would like to sneak away from that complete picture into the sidetracks of ordinary passions.

THE FIFTH DAY

On the fifth day there is the karma family, which is the pure quality of air or wind. It is a green light; the colour of envy. From the Realm of Accumulated Actions the tathāgata Amoghasiddhi appears. The karma family is associated with action and fulfilment and efficiency. It is powerful and nothing can stand in its way, therefore it is regarded as destructive. Amoghasiddhi means accomplishing all actions, all powers.

He is holding a crossed vajra in his hand. The vajra is a symbol of fulfilling all actions, tough and indestructible, as we saw in the vajra family. The crossed vajra represents the area of all activities completely perceived in all directions, panoramic fulfilment; often it is described as a multi-coloured vajra.

He is sitting on a seat of shang-shang, a kind of garuḍa; this particular type of garuḍa is a musician, he holds two cymbals in his hands and plays them as he carries Amoghasiddhi on his back. It is again a very powerful image and a symbol of fulfilment, a kind of super-bird, a transcendental bird who can fly and cover all areas, encompassing all space.

His consort is Samaya-Tārā, the Saviour of Sacred Word or Samaya. There are different interpretations of samaya in the tantric teachings, but in this case it is the actual fulfilment of the living situation at that moment.

Then there is the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, which means the Vajra-holder. Again it symbolises tremendous energy; he is the

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

bodhisattva of energy. And also Sarvanivaraṇaviskambhin, the Purifier of all Hindrances. If any hindrance happens in the process of karmic action, it comes from misunderstanding or inability to be in contact with the actual living situation, so the bodhisattva clears away these hindrances. In other words, this karma family contains both the absence of any hindrance, and the power of fulfilment.

Then there are the female bodhisattvas Gandhā and Naivedyā. Gandhā is the bodhisattva of perfume, she carries essence made out of all sorts of herbs, which represents the sense-perceptions or feelings; in order to have efficient skilful activity you need developed sense-perception. Naivedyā offers food, the food of meditation which nourishes skilful action.

The karma family transcends the skandha of concept, and is connected with the realm of the jealous gods. Again, as in any experience of wisdom as opposed to confusion, they both have the same quality. In this case they both have the quality of occupation, but wisdom completely covers the ground of all possibilities, seeing all possible ways of dealing with the situation in terms of subject and object, energy, texture, temperament, speed, space and so on, whereas confusion has a very limited way of dealing with situations, because it has never expanded itself or developed at all. Confusion is underdeveloped wisdom, primitive wisdom, while wisdom is completely developed.

THE SIXTH DAY

Next there is a crescendo of all the forty-two peaceful divinities. The five tathāgatas, the four guardians of the gates, the four goddesses and the six realms of the world appear simultaneously. We have a situation of basic bewilderment within which the five tathāgatas fill up all the space, all the directions, as well as any corners of emotional situations; there is no gap, no escape or sidetrack of any kind, because the four gates are also guarded by the four types of herukas.

The eastern gate-keeper is known as the Victorious One, which is connected with pacifying, but he appears in a wrathful

form to provide an awe-inspiring situation at the gate, so that you do not even think of getting out. He represents the indestructible, invincible quality of peace, that is why he is victorious.

Then the second one, in the southern gate, is the Enemy of Yama the Lord of Death. He is associated with the karmic activity of increasing wealth. Wealth in terms of time and space is very limited, rationed, so he who goes beyond that limitation is the Lord of the Lord of Death.

In the western gate is the Horse-headed Hayagrīva. He is the equivalent of an alarm system, as the neigh of the horse can wake you up in any unprepared situations. It is connected with magnetising, which is a kind of intelligent passion, so that you do not get involved in passion but it wakes you up.

In the northern gate is Amṛtakuṇḍalī, the Coil of Amṛta or anti-death potion. He is particularly associated with death. If there is any suicidal impulse of giving up hope, the anti-death medicine revives you; suicide is not the answer at all. You have the peaceful presence of victory, the increasing one which conquers any extreme concept of time and space, the magnetising principle which sends out an alarm, and the suicidal principle which gives you the anti-death potion. Fundamentally you are completely locked in without any sidetracks.

Moreover, there are the female principles of the gate-keepers. There is the female principle with a hook, to catch you like a fish if you try to run away. Or if you try to escape in terms of pride, to fill up all the space and not allow any other possibilities, the goddess with a lasso ties you from head to toe leaving you without any chance to expand. Another possibility is to run away through passion which is based on speed, but then the goddess with the chain chains you down so that you cannot move your feet and run away. And if you try to frighten anybody by aggression and make your way out, then the goddess with a very loud bell subdues your loud scream of aggression and your deep voice of anger.

Then you are reduced to facing the six realms of the world: the buddha of the gods, the buddha of the jealous gods, the buddha of the human beings, the buddha of the animals, the

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

buddha of the hungry ghosts and the buddha of the hell realm. All these visions appear from your heart centre, which is associated with emotion, passion and pleasure.

THE SEVENTH DAY

Next, the vidyādharaś begin to shine out from the throat centre, which is the essence of the communication principle. The peaceful divinities are associated with the heart, and the wrathful divinities with the brain. Speech is the link of communication between the two, which is the vidyādharaś. Vidyādharaś means holder of knowledge or insight. They are not quite peaceful and not quite wrathful, but intermediary; they are impressive, overpowering, majestic. They represent the divine form of the tantric guru, possessing power over the magical aspects of the universe.

At the same time, the green light of the animal realm appears, symbolising ignorance which needs the teaching of the guru to enlighten it.

THE WRATHFUL DEITIES

Now the principles of the five tathāgatas are transformed into the herukas and their consorts. The basic qualities of the families continue, but now they are expressed in a very dramatic, theatrical way; this is the energy of vajra, padma, and so on, rather than just their basic qualities. The herukas have three heads and six arms. The symbolical meaning behind this is the power of transmutation, expressed in the mythical story of the subjugation of Rudra.

Rudra is someone who has achieved complete ego-hood. There were two friends studying under a teacher, and their teacher said that the essence of his teaching was spontaneous wisdom; even if a person were to indulge himself in extreme actions, they would become like clouds in the sky and be freed by fundamental spontaneity. The two disciples understood it entirely differently. One of them went away and began to work on the spontaneous way of relating to his own characteristics, positive and negative, and became able to free them spontaneously without forcing anything, neither encouraging nor suppressing them. The other one went away and built a brothel, and organised a big gang of his

friends who all acted in a spontaneous way, making raids on the nearby villages, killing the men and carrying off the women.

After some time they met again, and both were shocked by each other's kind of spontaneity, so they decided to go and see their teacher. They both presented their experience to him, and he told the first that his was the right way, and the second that his was the wrong way. But the second friend could not bear to see that all his effort and energy had been condemned, so he drew a sword and killed the teacher on the spot. When he himself died he had a succession of incarnations, five hundred as scorpions, five hundred as jackals and so on, and eventually he was born in the realm of the gods as Rudra.

He was born with three heads and six arms, with fully grown teeth and nails. His mother died as soon as he was born, and the gods were so horrified that they took both him and the body of his mother to a charnel ground and put them in a tomb. The baby survived by sucking his mother's blood and eating her flesh, so he became very terrifying and healthy and powerful. He roamed around the charnel ground, and began to control all the local ghosts and deities and create his own kingdom just as before, until he had conquered the whole threefold universe.

At that time his former teacher and his fellow student had already attained enlightenment, and they thought they should try to subjugate him. So Vajrapāṇi manifested himself as Hayagrīva, a wrathful red figure with a horse's head, and uttered three neighs to proclaim his existence in the kingdom of Rudra. Then he entered Rudra's body by his anus, and Rudra was extremely humiliated; he acknowledged his subjugation and offered his body as a seat or a vehicle. All the attributes of Rudra and the details of his royal costume, the skull crown, skull cup, bone ornaments, tiger-skin shirt, human-skin shawl and elephant-skin shawl, armour, pair of wings, crescent moon in his hair, and so on, were transmuted into the heruka costume.

First there is the Great Heruka who is not associated with any of the five families, he is the space between the five families. The Great Heruka creates the basic energy of all the wrathful herukas, and then come the Buddha Heruka, Vajra Heruka, Ratna

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

Heruka, Padma Heruka and Karma Heruka with their respective consorts. They represent the outrageous, exuberant quality of energy which cannot be challenged. Fundamentally the quality of the five families is a peaceful state, open and passive, because it is completely stable and nothing can disturb it; the tremendous power of that peaceful state manifests as wrathful. It is often described as compassionate anger, anger without hatred.

Then there are the gaurīs, another type of wrathful energy. The five herukas are the existence of energy as it is, while the gaurīs are activating energy. The white gaurī dances on a corpse, her activity is to extinguish thought processes, therefore she holds a mace of a baby's corpse. Generally a corpse symbolises the fundamental neutral state of being; a body without life is the state without any active thoughts, good or bad, the non-dualistic state of mind. Then the yellow goddess holds a bow and arrow because she has achieved the unity of skilful means and knowledge; her function is to bring them together. And then there is the red gaurī holding a banner of victory made out of the skin of a sea-monster. The sea-monster symbolises the principle of saṃsāra, which cannot be escaped; the goddess holding it as a banner means that saṃsāra is not rejected but accepted as it is. Then in the north is Vetālī, black in colour, holding a vajra and a skull cup because she symbolises the unchanging quality of dharmatā. The vajra is indestructible, and the skull cup is another symbol of skilful means. We do not have to go through all of them in detail, but just to give a basic idea of these gaurīs and messengers connected with the wrathful maṇḍala, each particular figure has a function in fulfilling a particular energy.

The wrathful deities represent hope, and the peaceful deities represent fear. Fear in the sense of irritation, because the ego cannot manipulate them in any way; they are utterly invincible, they never fight back. The hopeful quality of wrathful energy is hope in the sense of a perpetual creative situation, seen as it really is, as basic neutral energy which continues constantly, belonging neither to good nor bad. The situation may seem overwhelming and beyond your control, but there is really no question of controlling or being controlled. The tendency is to panic, to think you

can keep control; it is like suddenly realising that you are driving very fast, so you put the brake on, which causes an accident. The gaurīs' function is to come between body and mind. Mind in this case is the intelligence, and body is the impulsive quality, like panicking, which is a physical action. The gaurīs intervene between intelligence and action, they cut the continuity of the self-preservation of the ego; that is their wrathful quality. They transmute destructive energy into creative energy. Just as the body of Rudra was transformed into the heruka, so the force behind the impulsive quality of panic or action is transmuted.

THE DYING PERSON

It seems that in the Tibetan culture people do not find death a particularly irritating or difficult situation, but here in the west we often find it extremely difficult to relate to it. Nobody tells us the final truth. It is such a terrible rejection, a fundamental rejection of love, that nobody is really willing to help a dying person's state of mind.

It seems necessary, unless the dying person is in a coma or cannot communicate, that he should be told he is dying. It may be difficult to actually take such a step, but if one is a friend or a husband or wife, then this is the greatest opportunity of really communicating trust. It is a delightful situation, that at last somebody really cares about you, somebody is not playing a game of hypocrisy, is not going to tell you a lie in order to please you, which is what has been happening throughout your whole life. This comes down to the ultimate truth, it is fundamental trust, which is extremely beautiful. We should really try to generate that principle.

Actually relating with the dying person is very important, telling him that death is not a myth at that point, but that it is actually happening. "It is actually happening, but we are your friends, therefore we are watching your death. We know that you are dying and you know that you are dying, we are really meeting together at this point." That is the finest and best demonstration of friendship and communication, it presents tremendously rich inspiration to the dying person.

The Great Liberation Through Hearing In The Bardo

You should be able to relate with his bodily situation, and detect the subtle deterioration in his physical senses, sense of communication, sense of hearing, facial expression and so on. But there are people with tremendously powerful will who can always put on a smile up to the last minute of death, trying to fight off their old age, trying to fight the deterioration of their senses, so one should be aware of that situation also.

Just reading the Bardo Thötröl does not do very much, except that the dying person knows that you are performing a ceremony of some kind for him. You should have some understanding of the whole thing, not just reading out of the book but making it like a conversation: "You are dying, you are leaving your friends and family, your favourite surroundings will no longer be there, you are going to leave us. But at the same time there is something which continues, there is the continuity of your positive relationship with your friends and with the teaching, so work on that basic continuity, which has nothing to do with the ego. When you die you will have all sorts of traumatic experiences, of leaving the body, as well as your old memories coming back to you as hallucinations. Whatever the visions and hallucinations may be, just relate to what is happening rather than trying to run away. Keep there, just relate with that."

While you are doing all this, the intelligence and consciousness of the dying person are deteriorating, but at the same time he also develops a higher consciousness of the environmental feeling; so if you are able to provide a basic warmth and a basic confidence that what you are telling him is the truth rather than just what you have been told to tell him, that is very important.

It should be possible to give some kind of simple explanation of the process of deterioration from earth into water, water into fire and so on, this gradual deterioration of the body, finally ending up in the luminosity principle. In order to bring the person into a state of luminosity you need the basic ground to relate with it, and this basic ground is the solidness of the person. "Your friends know you are going to die, but they are not frightened by it, they are really here, they are telling you that you are going to die, there is nothing suspicious going on behind your back." Fully being

there is very important when a person dies. Just relating with oneness is extremely powerful, because at that point there is uncertainty between the body and the mind. The body and brain are deteriorating, but you are relating with that situation, providing some solid ground.

As far as the visions of the peaceful and wrathful divinities are concerned, it seems to be very much left to the individual to relate with them himself. In the book it says that you should try to conjure up the spirit of the dead person and tell him about the images; you may be able to do that if there is still continuity, but it is very much guesswork as far as ordinary people are concerned; there is no real proof that you have not lost touch with the person. The whole point is that when you instruct a dying person you are really talking to yourself. Your stability is part of the dying person, so if you are stable then automatically the person in the bardo state will be attracted to that. In other words, present a very sane and solid situation to the person who is going to die. Just relate with him, just open to each other simultaneously, and develop the meeting of the two minds.